

How do we know who we are when we're online?: Reputation, identity, and influence in scholarly networks

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Abstract

This short paper outlines an ethnographic project exploring how influence, reputation, and academic identity are circulated and enacted within scholarly online networks. Both academia and social networks can be said to be 'reputational economies' (Willinksy, 2010), but while scholars and educators are increasingly exhorted to 'go online,' those who do often find that their work and efforts may not be visible or understood within institutional contexts. This project utilizes ethnographic methods and a material-semiotic theoretical approach to explore and detail the ways in which networked scholarly reputations operate, circulate, and intersect with contemporary concepts of academic impact. The study aims to articulate the signals which 'count' towards influence and scholarly reputation in networked circles, and to explore the benefits and challenges that networked scholarly participation poses for contemporary academics who engage in it.

Research into computer-based interactions has, for decades, suggested that online group members develop signals for status and credibility: Walther (1992) found "electronic communicators have developed a grammar for signalling hierarchical positions" (p. 78). More recently, Kozinets (2010) framed this status differentiation less in terms of hierarchy than "various strategies of visibility and identity expressions" (p. 24). Literature on networked scholarship is growing but has not as yet delved deeply into questions of how networked reputations, credibility, and status positions are produced, nor what implications these hold for conventional academic practices. This research investigates reputational strategies and practices within networked publics from a new literacies perspective, as a form of networked learning with the ethos of participatory culture. The paper explores the contexts, understandings, learning processes, and mediating technologies that have contributed to the development of participants' outlooks and specific practices. Likewise, it also frames those practices and outlooks in relation to multiple circulating concepts of influence that intersect within academic networks. Through interviews and extensive participant observation within scholarly online networks, this project explores how interactions within scholarly networked publics intersect with conventional notions of academic identity, and offers a snapshot of the various ways in which online networks open up new possibilities for scholarly engagement, learning, identity expression and influence that may not be visible, legible, or available within the academy.

Keywords

Networked publics, networked identities, networked participatory scholarship, digital scholarship, digital reputation, academic identity, academic impact, influence, reputation economy, ethnography

Research Context

Both academia and social networks can be said to be 'reputational economies' (Willinksy, 2010) in which communications are "the principal mechanism for creating knowledge and establishing reputation" (Hyland, 2003, p. 252). Conventional scholarship and 'academic impact' is codified and indexed, but the practices and indicators by which active networked scholars build reputations for open, public scholarly work are often tacit or invisible, even to those who engage in them. This dissertation research project utilizes ethnographic methods and a material-semiotic theoretical approach to explore and detail the ways in which networked scholarly reputations operate, circulate, and intersect with contemporary concepts of influence and 'academic impact.'

The complex techno-cultural relationship between scholarly networked practices and the reputations and identities they privilege is framed using the concept of networked publics, or "the space constructed through networked technologies, and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and

practice” (boyd, 2011, p. 39). Just as ‘the academy’ refers, imperfectly, to a broadly-understood confluence of practices, norms, and outlooks as well as to the historical public concept of the university, so the participatory subculture of ‘networked publics,’ in this research, is invoked to identify both a conceptual space and the practices that distinguish it: a particular form of social imaginary. Terms of entry to the two spheres are not identical, however: while many influential members of participatory scholarly networks are affiliated with universities, networked contributions to knowledge extend beyond formal channels to public, iterative, communications.

Aims and Objectives

This research investigates reputational strategies and practices within networked publics from a new literacies perspective, exploring the contexts, understandings, and mediating technologies that have contributed to the development of participants’ outlooks and specific practices. It also explores how interactions within scholarly networked publics intersect with conventional forms of scholarly networking and academic impact.

Design

This paper outlines an ethnographic dissertation project with fourteen participants, focused on Twitter but extending to blogs and other platforms identified as central to participants’ networked practices and learning processes. The scope of the research details the strategies and understandings participants employ in making sense of networked publics, and the challenges, changes, and benefits they report as part of their practice. The investigation builds on a tradition stemming back through Rheingold’s (1993) “virtual communities” to Hiltz and Turoff’s (1978) exploration of online work relationships, focusing on the social and cultural shifts that mark emergent networked academic practices. It draws on the work of Weller (2011), Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) and others in exploring digital scholarship, but its focus on reputational practices in the “new ethos” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007) of participatory engagement is new.

The premise of this project is that scholarly networked publics are, in Geertz’s (1973) terms, “suspended in webs of significance” (p. 2) that may not be visible to non-members who perceive them through the lens of conventional academic practices. Haraway’s (1988) framework of situated knowledges emphasizes the gaze: from the gaze or perspective of an individual acculturated to the practices of the academy, the ways in which influence is enacted and circulated within scholarly networked publics may appear arbitrary as compared against institutionally-legitimated concept(s) of academic reputation. Yet as Geertz (1973) noted, “(L)ooking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not, as has so often been claimed, the arbitrariness of human behaviour...the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by, which it is informed” (p. 7). This project explores networked participatory scholarship as a different pattern of life, and attempts to understand its webs of significance.

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